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Film, Gender, and Censorship in Northern Nigeria

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Abstract

This study examines the cinematic philosophy of the Hausa film industry vis-à-vis en/gendered spaces, film production, and censorship. It argues that film and video censorship in northern Nigeria is double-edged; stunting the growth of industry on one hand and maintaining a 'charlatanist' morality on the other. It draws on neo-historicism as a theoretical premise to contend that the manner and ways Kannywood films are censored delimit the functions of films as a vehicle of social correction and cultural engineering. It concludes that the cinematic culture of the Hausa film industry is at the crossroads: between staying with its own idealization of traditional modernity or the postmodern cinema; either way, the industry is programmed to be altered from the authentic self that the Kano State Censors Board (KSCB) is created to protect.

Keywords

Cultural politics; en/gendered; film censorship; Hausa cinema, media; morality

1. Introduction

The Hausa film industry is one of the largest indigenous film markets in Africa, and at the same time, one of the most regulated film industries in the world, considering its religious proclivity to promote Islam. Located in one of Nigeria's religious hubs and centres of Islamic scholarship, Kano, the industry churns out a rough estimate of about 364 films every year with a primary focus on the lives, belief system, and tradition of the peoples of northern Nigeria. Aljazeera, in 2016, noted that the Hausa movie industry contributes 30% of Nollywood's yearly production output. Due to the thematic commitment of the industry, Adamu (2007) refers to it as the "Islamicate, that is, the Hausa-Fulani Muslim flavoured visual entertainment.

Cinematic films came into northern Nigeria due to the intercultural encounters between the Hausa-Fulani, imperial Britain, Lebanese, and Indians (Banjo, 2023). The medium provided entertainment for the staffers of the Colonial Office during the colonial era, and with Nigeria's Independence in 1960, the art became popular amongst the local population (Banjo, 2023). The religious clerics and some of the elite restricted the import of foreign films, accusing the distributors of corrupting the youthful population. As a result, films from Western Europe and the United States lost their place. This paved the way for Lebanese and Indian businessmen in northern Nigeria to import film products from Asia and the Middle East. Again, the religious elites clamped down on the perceived corrupting influence of Indian films, accusing them of alienating the locals from indigenous cultures and deracinating the population. The need to provide filmic entertainment content for northern Nigeria that accurately represented their realities at the time propelled television producers to consider indigenous films. However, such a venture was not without heavy

censorship.

Within the last two and a half decades, the industry has been faced with myriad daunting controversies hinging on the moral correctness of gendering and representations, cultural misrepresentation and en/gendered spaces, cinematic modernity against tradition, and ultimately, the perpetuation of post-truths, some Islamic scholars who provide the ideological bastions used to restrain Kannywood. The industry started off with producing films based on controversial *soyayya* (love) novels, a thriving market of Hausa language literature that deals with romance and family politics (Carmen, 2013), with *Turmin Danya* (The Draw) as allegedly the first Hausa movie. The film was produced in 1990 by Tumbin Giwa Drama Group in Kano, two years before the acclaimed first Nigerian movie, *Living in Bondage* (1992) by Kenneth Nnebue. These films and similar stories were condemned by the mosques, and these prompted the Kano State government to set up the Books and Films Production Control Agency in 1996 (Adamu, 2010). This never materialised because the drafted edict was never released. After a series of failed attempts at censorship, first with working with the National Film and Video Censors Board (NFVCB) and other state regulations, the filmmakers decided on state censorship (Carmen, 2013).

The Kano State Censorship Board (KSCB) is the product of the efforts of the Motion Picture Practitioners Association of Nigeria (MOPPAN), Kano, and the Kano State government to regulate the Kano film industry. The Censorship Board was a response to the adoption of Islamic law in Kano a year earlier, under which filmmaking was threatened with abolition altogether. To circumvent the abolition of the industry, Kannywood voluntarily subjected itself to stricter censorship, notwithstanding the fines, production regulations, and environmental concerns.

2. Theoretical and Methodological Considerations

The study hinges on Neo-historicism. Neo-historicism is a literary theory propounded by Stephen Greenblatt in the 1980's and gained widespread influence in the 1990s. Ihidero & Liman (2020) conceive it as a literary theory used to interpret intellectual history through literature and literature through its cultural context, which is referred to as cultural poetics. According to Delahoyde, New Historicism seeks to find meaning in a text by considering the work within the framework of the prevailing ideas and assumptions of its historical era. New Historicists focus on the political function of literature and the notion of power, examining the complex mechanisms through which cultures generate and perpetuate themselves. These critics focus on revealing the historically specific model of truth and authority (not a "truth" but a "cultural construct") reflected in a given work.

Greenblatt and Foucault contend that there is always a self and a sense that can be fashioned within a social structure, to underscore the intricate interaction between identity, power, and resistance. Harold Veeser took the argument further by introducing other aspects to new historicism. He argues that every expressive act is embedded in a network of material practices, and that every act of unmasking, critique, and opposition uses the tools it condemns and risks falling prey to the practice it exposes (1989). He goes further to contend that no discourse, imaginative or archival, gives access to unchanging truths, nor expresses inalterable human nature. Kannywood operates within this social structure. Within the context of theory, historically, there has never been absolute calm between the entertainment industry and religions, not only Islam. As Ibrahim (2019) notes, "the frosty relationship between Islam and film is unarguably worse". Therefore, it is important to provide some methodological and conceptual clarifications on gender relations within the framework of Kannywood.

This study is rooted in qualitative research methodology. It uses the instrumentation of desk review, key informant interview (KII), in-depth interview (IDI), and observation for data gathering, which are triangulated for analysis. The study uses an interpretive frame of analysis to create meaning from the data collected. For ethical consideration, the two female key informants and one interviewee are kept anonymous. Only their first names and initials are used in this study.

3. Gendering and Context of Censorship in Kannywood

Gender may be perceived from many conceptual ideals. Examples include biological, sociological, postmodern, and post-structuralist, culturalist, and recently, post-digital humanity. This study identifies gender from the flow and contra-flow of biological cum sociological considerations governed by culturalist proclivity. It is the attributive distribution of the behavioural, cultural, or psychological traits typically associated with biological sex (Ihidero, 2020). Within the context of this study, gender is censored by the dictates of the KSCB as listed.

i. Generally, married women/girls are banned from acting;

ii. Single women in the industry are required to have a male guardian who would be legally responsible if their ward broke the rules;
iii. 'Loose' costuming or dressing of both male and female actors is prohibited;
iv. Decorum in language, action, and representations is to be maintained with utmost attention.
v. All scripts, contents, reels, and production covers to be supervised before distribution;
vi. All works produced outside Kano are to be submitted for censoring before distribution, etc.
vii. No body contact between male and female actors as well as production crew; No handshaking, let alone kissing;
viii. No nudity or transparent dresses to be worn;
ix. Subjects such as prostitution, lesbianism, and adultery may be portrayed, as long as it is clear to the audience that they are unacceptable; and
x. Song and dance are permissible, as long as there is no physical contact between the sexes (Barau, 2021).

Under these regulations, films are reviewed several times before they reach the Kano market. The entire production process, from the script and rough draft to the final cut and the cover, requires board approval, and if there are any issues, the director will be asked to change a line, a scene, or a too-revealing cover picture (Aljazeera, 2016). Breaking the set rules attracts fines, bans, suspension, and a prison sentence for artists. Between 2007 and 2011, over a thousand people working in the northern Nigerian film and entertainment industry were arrested and fined or served prison sentences, including singers, editors, marketers, video viewing centre owners, and gaming centre employees (Carmen, 2013). There is hardly an artist or filmmaker in Kannywood who has not had one or two encounters with the KSCB. One of the first films that ran into huge troubles with the KSCB was Aminu Bala's 2004 film, *Bakar Ashana (Black matches)*. It was a movie that explored the moral complexities of the world of prostitution (Grey, npag). Bala bypassed the KSCB and censored the film with NFVCB. The board arrested and fined him, as well as banned and seized the film from Kano shops (Adamu, 2010).

Following *Bakar Ashana* is an epoch event in 2007, which shattered all that the industry had been trying to protect, the Hausa culture and belief system. It all started when a private video of a Kannywood actress, Maryam Hiyana, and her lover, performing coitus, was leaked into the public domain and attained the status of one of the most downloaded videos from the internet in northern Nigeria. In fact, it was so popular that it became labelled as the 'first Hausa blue film'. Critics, including religious leaders, called for an absolute ban on the industry, citing the potential of the filmmakers and their films to morally corrupt their impressionable young children as a reason. For several months, production, distribution, sales, and exhibition of Kannywood films were stalled (Grey, npag). As a result, a hardliner and former leader of the Hisbah (Islamic Police), Abubakar Abdulkarim Rabo, was made to head the KSCB.

Under him, tougher guidelines to further rein in Kannywood were introduced. He mandated that each film practitioner in the industry register individually with the board. What followed were arrests, more fines, bans, and harassments. During his reign, popular actor and musician, Adam Zango, was arrested and sentenced to three months' imprisonment for releasing a video of songs from his album, *Bahaushiya*, straight to the internet without prior authorization from the board. Zango became the first in a long list of Kannywood filmmakers to spend time in prison for producing, exhibiting, or selling motion pictures believed by the Board to have trampled upon Hausa cultural values and Islamic religious beliefs (Grey, npag)

In 2008, Hamisu Lamido Iyantama, a popular Kannywood director, was arrested on his return to Kano from the Zuma Film Festival in Abuja. He was accused of releasing his film, *Tsintsiya*, an interethnic/religious romance drama made to promote peace. The film won the award for the best social issue film at the film festival in Kano without the approval of the censor board. He was in prison for three months. Comedians Dan Ibro and Lawal Kaura also spent two months in prison after a hasty trial without a lawyer. The allegation levied against them was that they 'owned an unregistered production company'. More than a hundred film industry workers, editors, singers, marketers, choreographers, actors, producers, and directors were rounded up in a day and thrown in jail by the board for various offenses (Ahmad Sarari in a chat with The Film Conversation, June 2022). Most of them spent several nights in jail, paid huge fines, and/or had their equipment seized by enforcers attached to the censor board. It was unclear under what jurisdiction these wanton arrests, detention, and confiscation of equipment were being made. It seldom happens that the filmmakers will be accused of artistic or literary goofs in other climes.

In 2016, Rahama Sadau was declared wanted for improper dressing and actions in a music video. Recently, a music artist was sentenced to death by hanging for producing a musical album that is reported to have anti-Islamic lyrics. With such stringent regulations, many Kannywood filmmakers and creatives have been directly and indirectly chased

out of the industry, with some of them relocating to the mainstream Nollywood or other cities like Jos, Kaduna, or Abuja.

The public perception of the Board's activities is that it was operating under Sharia Laws. And they could not be blamed because the Director of the Board frequently makes radio appearances through which he reiterates that the essence of the censor board is to protect the religious and cultural mores of northern Nigeria, tagging the male filmmakers as jobless and religious vagabonds, and the females, 'prostitutes'. Filmmakers were referred to as bad examples of Muslims. In one of the meetings with the Board, staffers of KSCB spat on the filmmakers, the highest form of insult in Hausa culture (Grey, npag).

If the KSCB is harsh, as often stated, the religious clerics appear to be worse. They forbid the purchase of Kannywood films for their members and pronounce the act of watching these films as an affront to Islamic ethics. In most cases, names of actors/actresses, movie producers, directors, and other behind-the-scenes crew members are called out during Friday sermons at mosques. All of these, and many more, greatly affected Kannywood's production and development. The height of the extreme dislike for film came in 2016 when Muslim clerics in Kano vehemently protested the Federal Government's plan to construct a film village in the commercial city, claiming that it would promote immorality. The government had to rescind the project, which was meant to further boost filmmaking in the North and create jobs for the youth. To proceed, it is important to discuss how women negotiate their gender and existence within the framework of Kannywood.

4. Women in Kannywood: Negotiating Existences in Censored Spaces

On paper, Kannywood is dominated by the male gender from the pre-production to the post-production stages. This appears to be so, considering the size of blurbs mostly seen in many Kannywood productions. In reality, it is not so. Women contribute far more to Kannywood production. A close examination of Kannywood productions from 2010 to 2020 suggests that the female gender, both as cast and crew members, constitutes more than 31% of the manpower from production to post-production.

A key informant interview session with F.A. Mohammed revealed that women do more in Kannywood than they are given credit for, noting that about 51% of the scripts produced are written by women either under pen names or for males. She says:

Most of the films you see in Kannywood are written by women, even though the credits are given to the males. For every 300 films produced every year, about 160 of them are written by us for producers. We cannot put our names to it because of certain 'unspeakable' conditions and practices. But what can we do? We write the script for them, and we get peanuts (12 June 2022).

Mohammed's communication suggests two things. One is that the volume of films produced yearly might have fallen from 364 to 300 by 2022 due to the tight spaces which women operate. The second is that the women in Kannywood negotiate their survival through ghostwriting rather than writing under pseudonyms and more so, under 'unspeakable conditions'. 'Unspeakable condition' in this context implies that the social stigma that comes with being associated with the industry may have forced women out of the industry since they mostly write without the knowledge of either parents or husbands. This follows the revelation of Fatima Yola (real name), a Kannywood actress, who noted that most Hausa parents do not support their daughters pursuing a film career. She says, "In the past, most Hausa parents did not support their daughters pursuing a film career, and many of the young unmarried women who started acting had run away from home, sometimes to escape a forced marriage." (An interview with Fatima Yola conducted by Yousoph Grey in March 2016).

It is observed that Fatima Yola no longer lives with her parents, which is atypical for an unmarried young woman in this region. Some of the stories in Kannywood productions reveal the kind of experiences lived by Fatima Yola. This, as the neo-historical analysis suggests, is one of the ways women negotiate their existence in Kannywood, *defiance*, which the KSCB is against. Another way Muslim women who desire to be on screen negotiate their existence is through choosing between two paths: choosing to remain unmarried or through divorce. Remaining single also means that the woman would have to remain under her father's roof and earn a little respect, or leave her father's house and be termed *karuwa* (a prostitute). One female actress who has taken this part is Hadiza Mohammed, who has been on the screen for the past 21 years. Hadiza Mohammed is not married and still lives with her parents. The actress can afford to live on her own. She says neighbours and family members tried to persuade her mother to order her to give up acting.

Another very insightful finding is that there is a lot of 'ghosting' *a la* 'ghost-producing' in Kannywood. Restrictions

and shame placed on women in Kannywood have propelled them to front their productions via the agency of the male gender. They write the scripts, cast the actors into roles, and supply all the resources needed to produce films, fronting with a man's name. Hajiya Rabi says that women control the industry from behind the scenes and that it is only a matter of time before complete takeover. She puts it succinctly thus:

> Censorship prevents some of us from fully showing what we have to offer the industry. Currently, some men, both within Kannywood and outside, still have issues with taking directives from female producers or production managers. So, what we do to remain relevant for now is to give such directives using the other agency, males. Some of the producers, directors, and actors you see out there were brought out by us (Key informant interview with Hajiya Rabo on the 13th June 2022).

The above follows the theorization of neo-historicism from the perspectives of Greenblatt and Foucault, who focused on the social structure to underscore the intricate interaction between identity, power, and resistance on the one hand, and Harold Aram Veeser, who argues that every act of unmasking, critique, and opposition uses the tools it condemns, on the other hand (1989: xi).

Further, Hajiya Rabi states that,

> It is about survival, and we are choosing between losing our family and staying committed to Kannywood. Those who you now see on screen and are doing well have thrown away family, friends, and bloodline to achieve their purpose. The only family they have is those in the industry. Even at that, they still have to survive that patriarchal thing within the industry. If you are too assertive, they will tag you and stop giving you roles. But what we do to support ourselves, especially when we are ghost-producing, is to cast such women. In some cases, we let them front productions as they have nothing to lose apart from their careers (Key informant interview with Hajiya Rabi on the 13th June 2022).

From the speech of Hajiya Rabi, it can be stated that there is a lot of 'undergrounding' going on in Kannywood that is yet to get to the public domain. More, within the already censored industry, there are patriarchal systems that attempt to further subjugate the female actors. Within the system, fellow male actors still view female actors as irresponsible; such is the case for women who have given up family to be in Kannywood. It is still formidable for male production crews as well as casts to take directions from females. Babangida Bangis, a film director, in an interview with BBC Pidgin, corroborates Hajia Rabi's account that young females are not 'permitted' to appear in films in Kannywood, but they could be producers because casting a young married woman in films contravenes Hausa cultural beliefs. In his words, "It's a rule in Kannywood that young married women cannot act in movies. The only married women are the elderly ones playing motherly roles. Young married women can be producers or something else, but not act." (Bangis, 2023)

In terms of credits or grants for film production, females are hardly considered for two reasons: one is that they are required to take permission from their husbands or fathers before applying. Second is that they may run into problems associated with production and marketability, as well as what one of the key informants refers to as 'certain conditions' (societal biases against female filmmakers). These biases appear to be maintaining a charlatanist morality perpetuated by censorship. By 'charlatanist morality,' I refer to the paradoxical situation in which censorship, while claiming to uphold Islamic ethical standards, actually perpetuates a hypocritical system that stigmatizes filmmakers, particularly women, while failing to address deeper structural issues. This morality is charlatanist because it presents itself as righteous while being arbitrary, inconsistent, and ultimately self-serving. Worse, it is stunting the development of Kannywood, considering the fact that most Kannywood content is one-sided, not well-rounded, with one-dimensional film characters. Again, it is charlatanist because the manner in which Kannywood films are censored delimits the didactic essence of films. The need to create a more engaging, social, and thematic committed arts has made filmmakers, both males and females, look beyond Kannywood by producing films that challenge all that the KSCB represents and subsequently get punished for the same. Actors and filmmakers such as Ali Nuhu, Rahama Sadau, Adam Zango, Sani Danja, Paul Sambo, Sani Mu'azu, and many more have left Kannywood for Nollywood. In fact, these filmmakers are gradually creating the standards for other Kannywood actors to follow. It is only a matter of time; Kannywood may only exist as a stepping stone to Nollywood.

What the hijra of Kannywood to Nollywood implies is that Kannywood is currently at a crossroads between opting for cinematic modernity against tradition, and or perpetrating the post-truths of a few Islamic scholars who provide the ideological bastions used to gag Kannywood or mirror the society with the intention to correct it. Whatever path

the industry takes will determine its fate within the next ten years: to gain entrance into bigger online platforms or remain gagged within the cocooning of a digitally alienated few.

Cinematic culture of the Hausa film industry is at the crossroads between maintaining the tradition of the Hausa people using the Islamicate and in doing so risk financial loss or aiming for commercial success by producing for movie platforms; either way, the industry is programmed to be altered from the authentic self that the Kano State Censors Board (KSCB) is created to protect. The emergence of streaming platforms like Netflix, Showmax, Amazon, and other streaming services is currently shaping how films are made as well as films in different languages. However, the choice is for the filmmakers of Kannywood as well as the KSCB to make, since the birth of censorship in Kano is the brainchild of the Motion Pictures Practitioners Association of Nigeria and the Kano State Government.

5. Conclusion

This article has considered the tricky relationship between censorship, gender representation, and Kannywood. It has also investigated the dynamics of social norms, political frameworks, and religious undercurrents and influences that inform and control artistic creativity and production in Kano, the heart of cultural activity in the Hausa-Muslim region of northern Nigeria. The empirical investigation adopts New Historicism as its theoretical structure. It draws on qualitative evidence garnered from a range of documentary sources (interviews, documentary sources) and contextualizes findings by drawing on wider cultural knowledge about the industry, its audience, and its cultural authority. The article spotlights the conflict between religious morality, gender norms, and creative expectations. The central argument of the article is that censorship, borne out of religiosity in northern Nigeria, has stifled ideas and creativity, and encouraged, particularly, the marginalization, invisibility, or subtle erasure of female workers in the Hausa cinema industry. Ultimately, Kannywood is at a critical historical moment, and the choices made now about cultural concerns and creative freedoms will determine the future growth of the industry and its sustainability.

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